Philosophy of dance

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I would only believe in a god who knew how to dance.
And when I saw my devil, there I found him earnest, thorough, deep,
somber: it was the spirit of gravity – through him all things fall.

– Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, section "On Reading and Writing."

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that deals with normativity or judgment outside the narrower realms of behavioral interaction (ethics) and permissible and impermissible reasoning (logic). In general, aesthetics is far less restrictive than ethics and logic. But aesthetic judgment still attempts to insert order on what is more – or less – preferable. On the basis of what? The urgency for imposing order is clearer in the case of ethics or logic…

Aesthetics compasses the philosophy of art (and much more besides, but regarding the fine arts it has much to say). We touched on the plastic arts here, and will eventually get around to music. This time we do dance.

...dance will begin to function as an art *of movement*
– John Martin

Dance[1] as art invites philosophical questions and reactions such as:

1. To start this discussion, we will define *dance* as motion manifesting agency without clear goal. It is not accidental, but not utilitarian, not therapeutic either physically or mentally except incidentally, and not confined to humans either as performers or audience. It is fundamentally expressive, which entails the presence of an audience to appreciate the communication, but not necessarily to cognitively interpret it.

What is dance? How is it different from other movement?

Is it merely biophysical? Or expression at a earlier evolutionary stage than language? Occurring even in animals, even in entities that may only give the appearance being alive?

Is it a form of body-to-body communication, bypassing cognitive involvement? Perhaps more basic than the other arts? But "communication" already implies cognitive involvement. Some *thing* is being communicated, what precisely? To the extent it is involuntary, like a sneeze (which may only communicate microbes), it is not art.

What aspects of dance ground its appeal to others?

- grace
- athleticism
- agency over body (or the reverse: the body grounding cognition)
- visceral expressiveness

As art, how is dance like and unlike other art forms? What is essential about its manifestation along the *external* dimensions of time and space, and the *internal* ones of emotion and cognition?

- dance – occurs essentially in time, space, and emotively
- music – occurs essentially in time and emotively
- plastic arts – occur essentially in space[2]
- theater – occurs emotively and cognitively
- film – occurs emotively and cognitively
- literature – is essentially cognitive
- performance art – open to all the above; dance clearly is a form of performance art, though performance art is not limited to physical expression (one day I will address how philosophy is performance art – ideas, too, may "perform")

These attempts to state what is basic about an art aside, nothing stops an art form – dance, for instance – from incorporating cognitive content, thereby spiking its punch with commentary, while remaining art and, as such, not prescribing anything. Nevertheless, the visceral means of expressing that dance (along with music) offers, when coupled with cognitive content may be especially potent (as in the Yoann Bourgeois or the "Katharsis" pieces linked to below).

2. There may seem to be exceptions to all these stipulations. The use of the word "essentially" is pointed. It is not that sculpture may not import *time* into its medium. Witness Andy Goldsworthy's work, which critically engages with the opposite of what we think of when we think of sculpture as something more or less *fixed* in time. Ephemerality is built into his work. It is an especially remarkable aspect of it. Similarly with the other claims here attempting to pin down a characterization. Exceptions prove rules. Goldsworthy's work is what it is in no small part because it *toys* with the rule. This *toying* with rules is, if anything is, an essential characteristic of art. Even when – as in minimalism or Dogme 95 – a rule is pedestalized, it is a performance with all the deliberateness that implies. A show is being put on. "Putting on a show," in contrast, is not an *ethical* virtue. This may be behind the suspicion Plato saw in art. But this dismissive judgment is extra-aesthetic. As such, aesthetics may assert its sovereignty, and pit itself against moral incursion. Morality may censure even to the delight of art. Art may make of ethics a character in a theatrical production.

A collection of dance and motion art shorts for entertainment and consideration

- Roland Petit, Bolero (16:36)
- Hellzapoppin' 1941 (5:45)
- Angelica Bongiovonni – Beautiful Cyr Wheel Dance (5:38)
- AMA – a short film by Julie Gautier (6:36)
- Jiri Kylian | Birth-Day | Nederlands Dans Theater (2:56)
- Ana Luisa Negrão , 314 – Prix de Lausanne 2023 Prize Winner – Contemporary (2:13)
- Ireneusz Krosny – Historia tańca/The Evolution of Dance (2016) (7:34)
- Rameau, Les Boréades: Entrée from Act IV (4:47)
- Pulp Fiction Legendary Dance Scene (John Travolta + Uma Thurman) (3:29)
- Rita Hayworth & Fred Astaire dance to Led Zeppelin (4:19)
- Pablo Verón, Sally Potter & co. dance Libertango (3:00)
- New York Philharmonic at Steinway Factory, Featuring Conrad Tao and Caleb Teicher (3:52)
- Bob Fosse dance numbers – "The Rich Man's Frug " (5:51)
- "Do You Love Me?" Boston Dynamics robots (2:55)
- AI Surreal Dance Video | Play It Late, Play It Loud - Kelly Boesch AI Art (2:58)

Yoann Bourgeois series

- Showreel (2:35)
- Approach 5. Metamorphosis | Trampoline Performance by Yoann Bourgeois (6:25)
- Notre Musique | Yoann Bourgeois (7:07)
- Celui qui tombe / the one who falls (5:39)
- La 7° symphonie de Beethoven (5:29)

Bent and cathartic

- Gilbert and George, "Bend It" (2008), Ponystep Magazine - Gilbert & George Warp Dance (warping the bent), and "Re: Gilbert & George Bend It" (learning to bend).

- "Katharsis" scene from the award-winning road film by Óliver Laxe, *Sirāt* (2025), whose story takes Rave culture and trance dance into the desert of southern Morocco. PLUR – Peace, Love,

Unity, and Respect – confronts the legacy *and* prospect of war... *each ecstatic step perhaps the last.* "Dancing with mines" is commentary in a sense "dancing with wolves" is not.

John Martin, a 1930s influential critic and early theoretician of dance, specified dance *as the art of movement.*[3] That captures it well. The "art" part of the definition captures intent and expressivity. The movement manifests will and communication. Something is *meant* by the movement. It is not merely motion according to physical laws of nature. An involuntary twitch, a volcanic eruption, or the motion of the earth around the sun is not, unwitnessed, dance or aesthetic expression.

That said, intent and expressivity may be *imputed* to any motion event whatever by a perceiver. This is true of all we call art, in fact, but when the medium is motion it is dance. The audience, the observer, the one who perceives[4] may decide it is art, is music, is dance, is beautiful, is disturbing. Thus aesthetic affect can be inspired by natural, non-agential, events, including motion events. So, yes, robots can dance, raindrops on window sills, moving digital imagery…

Philosophical resources

- "Dance as Philosophical Literature | Interview with Renee Conroy" (video), *The Calumet Roundtable*, Conroy, a dancer and philosopher, attempts answers to some basic questions about dance.

- "The Philosophy of Dance" (article), Renee Conroy, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2025. Dance approached from a mostly analytic perspective.

3. "That Earliest of Arts, the Dance; Mr. Martin's 'Introduction' Is an Authoritative Study Remarkable for The Comprehensiveness and Compression of Its Material," Katherine Woods, *The New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 31, 1939.
4. Where there is agency in the creator of the impression, the creator may also fill the role of perceiver. Art may indeed be "in the eye of the beholder," but the creator may own the eye. So there is objective judgment independent of an *external* observer.

- We may refer to some of the things discussed in a previous foray into art, here mainly the plastic arts: "Art: what is not in the eye of the beholder" (article). Much, though not all, of it applies as much to dance as art.

- "The Importance of Dancing like an Idiot," (video), *The School of Life*, Alain de Botton's "free-range" philosophy view.

- "Roger Scruton: Why You NEED to Dance (the Philosophy Explained)," (video), *Cultural Consolation*, comments on the Nietzschean concepts on the Dionysian and Apollonian and the place of dance within them.

Presentation intro:

Normativity is a blanket term philosophers use to describe value-conferring as opposed to fact-describing (what science does).

The three realms of normativity are logic, ethics, and aesthetics:

- logic is about the rules that determine valid and invalid reasoning,

- ethics is about permissible and impermissible behavior among sentient creatures, and

- aesthetics, a sometimes underrated branch of normativity, covers how and why we feel about everything not covered by the first two realms. So it's much broader. It tries to clarify and understand how we react to everything else around us left out by logic and ethics – and why.

We are surrounded by things in nature (including animal artifacts), and by human artifacts that we are sometimes compelled to react to. There are questions specific to aesthetics in nature, but we focus here on human artifacts and events, more specifically those we call "art," more specifically, still, "the art of movement" as an early theoretician of dance, John Martin, in the 1930s called it.

Defining and characterizing questions

Renee Conroy, a dancer and philosopher, who writes the current entry on dance in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers an overview of some of the questions philosophers ask about dance. These are some of the questions and insights that emerge from her entry.

What is dance?

Identity: what makes a dance the same when performed on different occasions (there's a similar question with music, less so with the plastic and literary arts)? Is every performance of dance a different piece? Or, less question-beggingly, are no two dance events the same?

Does dance have essential fixed elements or does its power consists in inspiring movement in a direction more broadly? Is it static or interactive? (The same question applies to music, though music seems somewhat less permissive. Unlike music, dance has no settled notation.)

Related to the above point about essential features and permissiveness is the importance of agency in the conception of dance – agency is the degree to which dancers are free to originate movement as opposed to reproducing it?

Two elements of dance have been suggested as essential :

Expressiveness or symbol-making power? Centrality of visceral expressiveness? (Susanne Langer wrote of dance's visceral symbol-making power: from Michael Jackson's crotch-grabbing to Yoann Bourgeois' exquisitely choreographed falling, a recurring motif in his work.)

Ephemerality? Is this an essential feature of dance (unlike the plastic or literary arts)? Its passing from one moment to the next? Other arts, such as music, may also claim this feature but it's not clear momentariness is essential to music. Time passing may be incidental to music. And even some of the material arts such as sculpture may dabble in ephemerality (Andy Goldsworthy's work, for example).

the philosophy club

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at
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Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle